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AUTHOR Nickel, Gerhard
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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to show what parameters come into play when dealing with the problem of difficulty in foreign language learning. After subjecting the hierarchy of difficulty set up by R.P. Stockwell and J.D. Bowen to a critical examination, the author discusses various parameters such as individual and national difficulties, the chronological factor and its effects on interstructural and intrastructural interference, and the type of learner concerned. He comes to the conclusion that the setting up of scales of difficulty requires the cooperation of linguists as well as of pedagogues, psychologists, and representatives of other disciplines. (Author)

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VARIABLES IN A HIERARCHY OF DIFFICULTY[1]

Professor Dr. Gerhard Nickel, M.A., University of Stuttgart, Western Germany

abstract:
This paper is an attempt to show what parameters come into play when dealing with the problem of difficulty in foreign language learning. After having subjected the hierarchy of difficulty set up by R.P. Stockwell and J.D. Bowen to a critical examination, the author discusses various parameters such as individual and national difficulties, the chronological factor and its effects on interstructural and intrastructural interference and the type of learner concerned. He comes to the conclusion that the setting up of scales of difficulty requires the cooperation of linguists as well as of pedagogues, psychologists and representatives of other disciplines.

Undoubtedly the problem of difficulty plays a very important role in connection with language teaching and language learning. It is important for the producer of language material because in his ordering of linguistic facts the latter must know something about the problem of difficulty from the learner's point of view.[2] His staging and sequencing of the material will depend upon his idea of what linguistic difficulty is. Knowledge of linguistic difficulty is also of basic importance to the evaluator of tests, his evaluations being partly determined by his idea of linguistic difficulties. Language tests as well as error analysis will have to be taken into account if they are to be objective and just.

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[1] Paper read to the Pacific Conference on Contrastive Linguistics and Language Universals, Honolulu, 11th-16th January 1971.

[2] M.A.K. Halliday, A. McIntosh, P. Strevens, The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching (London, 1964), p.204f.

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In dealing with linguistic difficulties two problems have to be considered separately: What is a learner problem? And once it is known what a learner problem is, one has to decide whether it is advisable to avoid concentrations of these or to use some kind of shock therapy by piling up difficulties at certain stages of the learning process.

As to the second question, one possible approach consists in providing adult learning material in which difficulties are concentrated at the beginning, on the assumption that there are some learners who prefer to take hurdles at the very beginning before going on to easier stages. The underlying principle is very often also a contrastive one, though in a paradoxical way. Instead of following the path of similarity and thus making the learner believe that the similarity covers the whole area of certain functions, one prefers to begin with differences in order to avoid mistakes via over-generalization. Thus a course for learners of German in a BBC programme sets out with the present perfect in connection with the auxiliary sein (= 'to be') instead of haben (= 'to have') in order to prevent British learners of German from assuming that the German present perfect is always formed by means of haben. From a contrastive point of view it would certainly have been much easier to start out with haben before proceeding to sein because there is a great deal of agreement between the two languages on this point. Tests would have to demonstrate which way is the safer one.

However, priority has to be given to determining what a linguistic learner problem is. Some linguists like R.P. Stockwell and J.D. Bowen have established what might be called a kind of linguistic logic of the hierarchy of difficulties. Basing their assumption upon the concept of transfer (negative transfer, positive transfer, and zero transfer), they try to tackle the problem of difficulty by focusing their attention on the kinds of choices that exist in any given point of a language. At the phonological level they distinguish between optional and obligatory choices, to which they add a third set: zero choices, i.e. choices which exist in one language, but not in the other. Thus they arrive at a scale of eight difficulties in connection with

English and Spanish[3]. The notion of optional choice refers to the possibility of selection among phonemes, while the notion of obligatory choice refers to the selection of conditioned allophones. Within the eight-scale system of difficulties the highest degree of difficulty is to be found when a learner of a language faces an obligatory choice in the target language while his source language has a zero choice in this particular case.

Here and in other cases in connection with the whole scale one cannot help feeling that the decisions are somewhat arbitrary. In many cases distributional problems (e.g. the distribution of German voiced /z/ versus English voiceless /s/ in initial position) seem to be more difficult for German learners of English than the acquisition of entirely new sounds like /θ/ and /ð/. Nor is it clear why obligatory rules automatically rank higher as far as the degree of difficulty is concerned than optional rules.

Applied to syntax, the conception of a hierarchy of difficulties becomes even more problematic. The underlying assumption is the same:

> "The construction of the hierarchy of difficulty depends on the assumption that some correspondences are more difficult to master than others (including, as correspondences, those instances where a rule in one language finds no corresponding rule in the other, or where a category in one is unmatched by a category in the other)."[4]

Again the authors ask what the logic of such a hierarchy is. As constant factors are chosen: propriety, situational context and cultural viability, the variables are either obligatory or optional choices as before, though in a different sense. In the case of positive matches we find structural correspondences as well as functional-semantic correspondences. In the hierarchization of phonology it was necessary to compare only categories of choice

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[3] Cf. R.P. Stockwell and J.D. Bowen, The Sounds of English and Spanish (Chicago, 1965), p.10; see also G. Nickel and K.-H. Wagner, "Contrastive Linguistics and Language Teaching", IRAL 6(1968), p.245f.

[4] R.P. Stockwell, J.D. Bowen, J.W. Martin, The Grammatical Structures of English and Spanish (Chicago, 1965), p.282.

without reference to functional-semantic correspondences; here things become more difficult because of the presence of the semantic parameter. The authors end up with a scale of sixteen difficulties. This scale is also based on some kind of linguistic logic, but is not transparent either in all cases. Again it is taken for granted that a construction not contained in the source language but contained in the target language belongs to the class of greatest difficulty. In most cases this is certainly true, but it is doubtful, whether it is always true. Then it is taken for granted that option and obligation follow each other in a sequence of difficulty. It is also taken for granted that the absence of structural correspondence makes things more difficult than the absence of functional-semantic correspondence. This has to be tested and proved yet. Moreover, the scale established is much too broad since it ignores the phenomenon of partial agreement between constructions. For instance, the German and English perfect partially agree in form and function[5].

There is no question that a great deal of arbitrariness underlies this selection of parameters for setting up a scale of linguistic difficulties. But the authors know that apart from this hierarchy of difficulty there are other factors to be taken into account such as 'functional load', 'potential mishearing', and 'pattern congruity'[6]. They are well aware that "Matching these criteria against one another is no easy task, and there is clearly no single 'right' or 'best' sequence of presentation"[7]. But in spite of their considering the other factors in addition to their linguistic hierarchy of difficulties the whole procedure is, in the main, still based on some kind of linguistic logic. Experiments presenting material based on different criteria might well prove one day that learners' difficulties have as little to do with linguistic difficulties as general logic has to do with linguistic logic in the reality of a given language. What we need here is more experimental work.

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[5] Cf. G. Nickel, "Contrastive Linguistics and Foreign-Language Teaching", in: Papers in Contrastive Linguistics, ed. G. Nickel (Cambridge, 1971).

[6] Cf. R.P. Stockwell and J.D. Bowen, The Sounds ..., p.16f.

[7] ibid., p.17.

The authors themselves are not against such experiments:

> "The hierarchy is a set of predictions which must be tested against observations of problems students do in fact have. Such observations are more difficult to make than one would suppose: we were once told by a distinguished professor of Spanish, whose native language is English, that we made too much of the problem of gender agreement - it took no more than 15 minutes to explain, and then one could forget about it. Within 15 minutes after that he made no less than half-a-dozen errors in gender agreement himself. So it is important to distinguish between what may be difficult to explain (preterit, imperfect, indicative, subjunctive) and what is difficult for the student to internalize - the two may or may not be the same."[8]

This is certainly a very good observation. Most of the interpretations of difficulties and most of the presentations of learning material are based anyway on the teacher's and not on the learner's point of view. If we ever intend to set up more successful material including multimedia teaching systems, we will have to find out more about the learning processes and the learner's mentality.

What other parameters of difficulty are there? First of all, following the contrastive lines explained above, one would have to distinguish between national and individual difficulties. While some pedagogues think that the phenomenon of objective linguistic difficulty does not exist in foreign-language learning, linguists will certainly hold that there is such a thing. There can hardly be any doubt that the learning of a completely unrelated language like Chinese presents an enormous number of difficulties for a learner whose source language is either English, French or German[9].

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[8] Cf. R.P. Stockwell, J.D. Bowen, J.W. Martin, The Grammatical Structures ..., p.282.
I am reminded here of similar conditions referring to the distinction between the uses of 'who' and 'which' in English. Many German teachers can be found who are able to clearly explain the theoretical differences without being immune to the wrong use of 'which' instead of 'who'.

[9] C. James in his article "The Exculpation of Contrastive Analysis", in: Papers in Contrastive Linguistics enumerates and tries to measure the difficulties from national points of view.

National difficulties are mainly based on contrastive interference problems with their negative transfers. On the whole, we can say that related languages will present fewer problems of difficulty than unrelated ones. It is, however, advisable to distinguish between decoding and encoding processes. Certainly the similarity between languages will help in the decoding process but might well present great difficulties in the encoding process because of the relationship between lexical items and constructions, which might be similar on the formal side but different on the functional-semantic side. Since formal correspondence tends to more or less automatically arouse functional-semantic hopes of equivalence, relationship may be quite dangerous. All learners of Romance languages will know the difficulties when learning the second or third Romance language[10].

Linguistic difficulties will also be diminished through strong national motivation. When we speak of national talents for the learning of languages we should really speak of parameters like national motivation, good school systems, and relatedness of languages. Motivation is one of those major factors in language learning likely to reduce problems of difficulty in the light of some kind of pedagogical optimism.

In our matrix of parameters of difficulties we also have to distinguish between different kinds of linguistic level. On the whole, especially if learned very early, phonology and phonetics will cause, relatively speaking, fewer difficulties than, for instance, the complex systems of syntax. There is more 'directness' in being faced with a phonological system than in being faced with the complexity of syntactic phenomena. One also has to consider that syntax involves phonology but not vice versa, i.e. attention has to be paid to several phenomena including semantics, morphology, etc. This concentration upon several points at the same time certainly presents greater difficulties than does concentrating upon one point only like the pronunciation

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10 W.R. Lee, "Thoughts on Contrastive Linguistics in the Context of Language Teaching", in: J.E. Alatis, ed., Report of the Nineteenth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Studies. Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics 21(Washington, D.C. 1968).

of a given sound. The subtler the distinctions become from an intrastructural point of view the more difficult these items become for the learner.

This is particularly true with regard to style and synonyms. We all know that the progress made in learning a language is relatively rapid in the beginning stage and then slows down at the advanced level. This means that curriculum researchers will have to investigate whether one should not learn more languages on a lower level rather than pursue one or two up to perfection, including the climbing of stylistic peaks. Since it is not so much the communicative aspect that is dealt with at an advanced level but rather the expressive and artistic functions of the language, motivation seems to dwindle, too. Thus an increase in difficulties may also be due to the latter fact.

There is another factor implied in the above statement, i.e. the factor of chronology. Undoubtedly some of the difficulties arise because of intrastructural generalizations due to chronological priority given to certain lexical items and structures. We all know that patterns learned first have priority over patterns learned at a later date because of the convenient simplicity of these first basic structures. This kind of intrastructural interference will take place even against an interstructural contrastive background. Thus Norwegian learners of German will very often use word order of the main clause type in subordinate clauses even though conditions in their mother tongue are similar to those in the German target language because the main clause word order had been deeply engraved in the brains of the learners. S.P. Corder quotes examples of the type *'She is a beautiful' formed on the analogy of the very frequent and well-established pattern 'She is a teacher', which are to be found especially with speakers who have no articles in their source languages. Undoubtedly chronology together with the hidden traps of too intensive pattern drills may increase difficulties.

It should be clear by now that the problem of difficulty must be tackled not only on an interstructural basis but also on an intrastructural one. If distinctions within one language are clear enough, difficulties will decrease. Though, for instance, the use of the present perfect and the preterit in English is different from the use of these two tenses in German good examples and cognitive insights at a

later stage will help the learner to distinguish between these two tenses in spite of contrastive difficulties. On the other hand, the distinction between the expanded and non-expanded form in English 'he is sitting' vs. 'he sits' is not only difficult for a German learner of English because of interstructural contrastive difficulties but also because of intrastructural problems. We all know that the use of these two forms with their close connections with the character of the verbs, tense, etc., involves quite a lot of distinctions ranging between grammaticalization and stylistics, which are sometimes difficult for the native speaker of English, too. Close examination may well prove that objective difficulties are also present to a certain degree where even a native speaker when learning his mother tongue is inclined to make errors in particular cases.

Undoubtedly difficulties arise also from the fact that more than one target language is being acquired. In some cases, especially at a beginner's level, this interference may be even stronger than the interference between mother tongue and first target language. In trying to get away from his mother tongue a learner will, often subconsciously, decide to choose an item from another target language rather than fall back upon his mother tongue. There seem to be situations in which the opposition is mother tongue on the one hand and target languages on the other. This attitude towards target languages as a kind of pool has to be considered when judging errors made by learners with more than one target language, especially when the target languages are also related among themselves.

In dealing with the problem of difficulty the whole context of the test in which a certain difficulty is present must be taken into account. We know that in oral usage more mistakes are made than in written usage because in the former case time for checking and reflecting is often very limited. Moreover, in oral usage the factor of personal engagement in a lively conversation or discussion plays an important role, a factor which tends to increase the ratio of interference phenomena of all kinds.

Written tests involve similar problems. Multiple choice tests or translations, especially if the latter type is connected with selected chapters of grammar and lexis, will diminish difficulties because the learner is aware that he has to concentrate on this particular

kind of test, its problems and questions. On the other hand, tests like retelling of stories or impromptu essays with lively contents will tend to draw away the learner's attention from the formal linguistic side to the contents side of the test, thus increasing difficulties. Undoubtedly the latter type is a more natural type of test though at the same time a more tricky one because of the traps present there. This again is very important for the evaluation of errors and their grading[11].

Thus there is a wide range of difficulties extending from national difficulties to individual ones. Where the individual is concerned we will also have to consider speech defects and certain linguistic 'obsessions' that are due to some negative experience in the classroom where a pupil was laughed at or criticized too severely in connection with an error so that this error got firmly impressed upon his mind setting up subjective difficulties based on sociological experience.

Apart from national and individual differences difficulties are closely connected with certain types of learners. Thus there may be learners who have no problems in connection with paradigmatic dimensions but great difficulties in the syntagmatic dimension.

Furthermore, it would have to be tested, to what extent visual aids help to diminish or increase the degree of difficulty. The same applies to the cognitive element that may in some cases reduce, in other cases increase difficulties.

The latter statements implicate the role of pedagogics. While I believe in certain objective and inherent difficulties of language items from the national and individual point of view I do not exclude the important role of pedagogics as a factor decreasing or increasing difficulties. I am convinced that the problem of difficulty cannot be solved from an exclusively linguistic point of view, but only in its complete context of linguistic presentation and pedagogical embedding.

I am somewhat doubtful about the possibility of measuring difficulties mathematically as has been attempted in the recent past in the field of phonology. Until we know

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[11] Cf. G. Nickel, "Grundsätzliches zur Fehleranalyse", in: G. Nickel, ed., Angewandte Sprachwissenschaft und Unterrichtspraxis. Vol.I: Fehlerkunde (Berlin, 1971).

more about learning processes within the process of language acquisition and until we know what it means to be gifted for language learning, we will not be able to measure difficulties completely on an objective basis. While some pupils have no problem in imitating even the strangest sounds because of a certain musical gift and a certain artistic flair combined with a general uninhibited natural attitude, others lack that talent. This can also be shown in connection with the differences between boys and girls at an early age when girls tend, on the whole, to be freer and less inhibited than boys when learning foreign languages.

Linguistics, psychology, pedagogics and other disciplines will have to cooperate in setting up scales of difficulty.